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Conservation of Wooden Architecture: Willingness, Support and Tradition

Arif Sarwo Wibowo*

School of Architecture, Planning and Policy Development, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Bandung, Indonesia

Abstract

Thousands of wooden architecture can be found almost anywhere in Indonesia, delivering different shapes and carpentry technique in the form of palaces, religious buildings, houses and even simple barns. Uncontested, all of these have already become national treasures without having them be officially promoted as national heritage. One of the most important aspects of conservation work at the early stage is self-awareness, by the owner as well as the government, in keeping a building as heritage and it being part of the national culture. Even after realizing how important and valuable keeping the original building is, not many individual have the budget or access to an expert. Having a look at how the conservation work is applied in Japan may provide the chance to adopt some approaches to increase the people and government's willingness and support, as well as making it a tradition in the future.

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1. Introduction

Indonesia has a huge number of cultural heritages, and many of these are architectural: the traditional and colonial buildings. Although the government had issued the latest law for the protection of cultural properties in 2010, there is still a lack of indication in the field that those heritages are being protected. Taking an example from Bandung city, the most famous city in Indonesia for colonial buildings, even this city's government can do nothing for preserving its colonial buildings, where many of them are currently being demolished and replaced by new

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +62-22-2504962; fax: +62-22-2530705.

E-mail address: wibowo@ar.itb.ac.id

buildings (Siswadi, 2014). Reflecting the current condition and the race against time in avoiding further demolition or extinction, a real action should be taken immediately.

First of all, the point that should be understood by everyone is the position and context of a cultural heritage as part of national identity and culture; followed by the understanding of the importance of keeping the cultural heritage as a national treasure. A nation will never exist without culture, and architecture is one of the so many products of cultures. Wooden architecture, which in most contexts refers to traditional architecture, is one of the categories of architecture that surely needs to be conserved as part of the culture. Traditional architecture also sits in a dangerous situation for becoming extinct. Taking for example, surveys of 30 old wooden or brick mosques in West Sumatera in 2009; 5 of these mosques were completely rebuilt into new ones without leaving any sign of the past. 9 out of those 30 mosques are made of wood. Even though these mosques are registered as national/local heritage by the government, most of the wooden mosques are unmaintained and are endangered in breaking down and becoming demolished by themselves.

The law for the protection of cultural properties has been issued several times, but in the reality, still many assets are left behind for conservation work. Probably, financial limitation could be one of the aspects for the incapability of the government to run an adequate conservation program for all cultural properties. Conservation work taken solely by the government, without any help from people, would be a very hard and expensive task. As a simple example of how people can help by take action in conservation activity is by providing required information related to buildings. This kind of action will only succeed based on the willingness of each.

This article will discuss how an individual's willingness can take part in the conservation system scheme, and how, with the support from the government, this will develop a tradition. Once this system is developed into a tradition, the conservation activity will no longer be a difficult task to execute. The discussion will be supported by a case study in Japan. Japan is one of the leading countries in the context of wooden architectural conservation systems, and has been proven for centuries as a country that treats building conservation as part of their tradition.

2. Research Design and Methods

This research is intended to find out how the conservation system for wooden architecture in Indonesia lacks, by comparison to Japan's success in keeping their wooden architecture heritage for centuries, and furthermore, to bring this to a stage of tradition. The research was contrived through understanding the present situation in Indonesia and learning how the Japanese system for wooden architectural conservation can be applied by examining it as a referential case study for actual implementation. The written regulation and law system will be used as the reference and basis of discussion into seeing what is available and what lacks, of terms of regulation. This study will also help to give an understanding on how to implement the law of protection for cultural properties into a real action.

The research will take the case of the conservation project of Ono family residence in Shiojiri, Japan. This case study is representing a typical case of a conservation project on a private property in Japan. The data was taken from an open-ended interview with the owner, conservation architect and the local government officer for cultural properties, and an observation of the site during the project. The interview and observation were done in 2013.

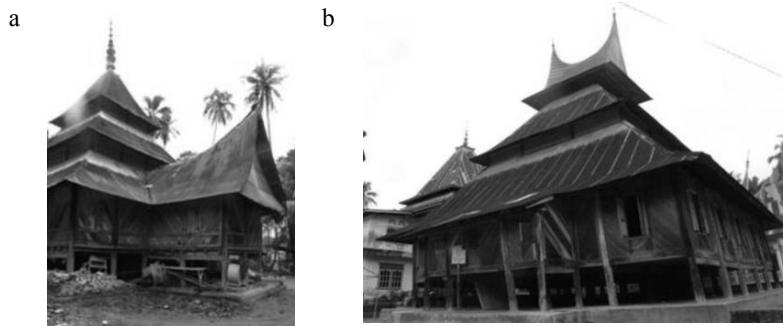


Fig. 1. (a) Masjid Tua Padang Piaman; (b) Surau Gadang Syaikh Burhanuddin, West Sumatera.

The main aim of this research is to learn how conservation of wooden architecture can be executed in the most effective way, in the sense of communication, action and finances. Hopefully, this discussion will sharpen our mind to understand the complexity in taking a conservation work and to understand the importance of creating collaboration and networks between people and government.

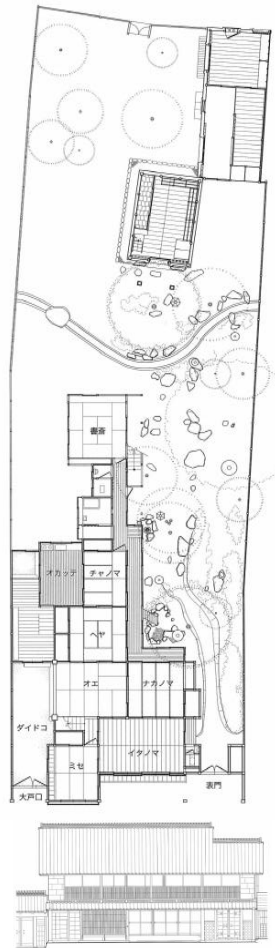


Fig. 2. Plan and elevation of the Ono family resident. Source: Shiojiri City Board of Education, 2006.



Fig. 3. Reinforced steel cable structure at the Ono family resident.

3. Discussion

3.1. Growing Awareness and Willingness

Architecture is only one part of the cultural products (such as art-craft, music, cloth etc.). The Ono family residence is a typical example from Japan of how the owner of a heritage building has the awareness and willingness to keep it as a heritage. Their awareness arises as a result of their understanding of general Japanese history, particularly the history of their hometown and family. As a consequence, they keep the original architectural drawing of the building, mostly consisting of the drawing plan, drawn in the Edo Period.¹ The awareness of the importance of the building was also related to the significance and connection to their ancestors. In their mind, the only thing that can connect them to the past and their ancestors is the house. The house keeps many memories for the family, and much more importantly it keeps, and can tell by itself, the past history of civilization. An awareness of how important cultural heritage is came from knowledge and understanding. This awareness will automatically stimulate the willingness to conserve or preserve.

Willingness is the starting point for an action. The action for conserving heritage can be executed individually or in groups. But most of the owners of cultural heritage are incapable of maintaining it, as they do not have any knowledge about it or do not have enough resources to support it. Looking back to the Ono family residence conservation project, the owner already had both the awareness and the willingness to preserve their residence. In fact, they have maintained the house for decades, but they realized that they couldn't support it anymore, as the maintenance cost for an old building is very expensive. They tried to repair broken parts of the house when they could, but unwittingly this effort put it far from what is called conservation, because of the usage of wrong material and technique. This means that owner awareness and willingness are not enough to keep and maintain a cultural heritage.

Solely a self-effort action would be very hard for most people, and sometimes this will endangering the cultural property itself. That is why an awareness and willingness from the owner, or other people, should be accompanied by an expert. Unfortunately even experts can do nothing, without any support from the government as the authorized institution.

3.2. Authorized Institutional Support

An authorized institution should be included in any conservation work. The institution should consist of an expert in the field of architectural conservation, professional association and from the government. The government should have the expertise to identify any cultural properties to be preserved. The government can collaborate with professional association for preservation programs and projects. This will define the government support for the cultural properties.

One of the government support examples is what the Shiojiri City government did in the case of the conservation of the Ono family residence. Their support had not given only for a short period. The conservation project of Ono family residence took several years to happen, starting in 2005 with the survey for the conservation plan by the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Nara. The Shiojiri City government had entrusted that institution to study further for this purpose. Based on interview during field survey in May 2013, the study ended up with a detailed report about the building's history and physical condition, together with the strategy plan for the conservation work.

At first, the conservation project was only planned for the building in the front area. Considering further difficulties that they might be faced within bringing material to the site during the project, after being forced to rent a part of the neighbor's land for the access, had brought them to a decision to restore the whole building on the site at once. Their concerns did not have the opportunity to rent the neighbor's land in the future, so it was the only chance to take action on it.

¹Edo period or Tokugawa period is the period between 1603 and 1867 in the history of Japan.

This case shows how the government has a long-term view of the situation, and thus facilitates the effectiveness of the project for a long-term period. The project was funded by a multi-year scheme, this allows for periodical evaluation, which is appropriate in the context of conservation work. There were many findings during the process that forced experts to make several changes to the project plan. One of the most significant revisions was related to the reinforced structural system. Some modification should be taken in the field after discovering the real original structural system of the building.

After the Great Hanshin earthquake in 1995, otherwise known as Kobe earthquake, the Japanese government's way of thinking changed in the context of the conservation of wooden architecture. Previously, the conservation work was simply restoring buildings to the original state using the same material and traditional techniques, and gave a very limited space to an additional component. But since then, the Japanese government revised the regulation and recommended to build structural reinforcement for any historical building to prevent large damage during earthquakes and any other disaster. But still additional material or structure added to a heritage building should be hidden or invisible so that it will not affect the original appearance. The building should be capable of being restored back to its original state at anytime needed. This is one of the most important steps taken by the Japanese government in the context of conservation. This latest regulation was also applied in the case of the Ono family residence. All structural parts had been reinforced using a steel beams and cables, to keep it stable during the earthquake.

3.3. Turning System into Tradition

The conservation tradition in Japan has been structured into a formal institution. Professional experts and carpenters realized the need of an institution where they could improve their knowledge and skills, and pass these onto younger generations. The system was made secure to keep the high standard quality of work. In terms of avoiding the building quality of being decreased, a professional institution should provide quality control standards and working processes that keep anything in order. So, this high-quality work can be maintained for long time. Carpentry workshops and the transference of knowledge are periodically performed, and these became a part of the tradition as well as in the professional association.

In the case of Japanese conservation, this system had been run for centuries, in that automatically became a part of their tradition and culture. This tradition was developed with the support of the government through their updates on law and regulation. The government gave the highest recognition to those who had a traditional craftsmanship skill and protected them from being annihilated (The Japanese Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, 1950). The Japanese Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties clearly emphasized the importance of keeping the traditional knowledge of building construction. By having such appreciation, people will not hesitate to master those kinds of skills.

Regarding the case of Indonesia, traditional housing construction skills are mostly appreciated because of their commercial purposes. Traditional houses become a business commodity. Up to now, there is no professional association for traditional building construction experts that can be used as a partner for the government in doing conservation work.

4. Conclusion

In every step of conservation work, the government has an important role. The government's law becomes the basis of any action, starting from initially growing the awareness and willingness to preserve cultural properties, up to the application of fieldwork guidelines. The regulation issued by the government in their laws for protecting cultural properties are mostly related to how a heritage object should be treated, but not on how to develop a social consciousness about the heritages. This social consciousness should be developed under the unconditioned systems that in the end became a tradition. This is what is also called public engagement for the maintenance of cultural heritages.

Taking the Ono family residence as a referential case, the planning of conservation program for traditional houses should include basic policy, management, environmental conservation and disaster prevention. A

conservation project should consider multiple aspects of knowledge, which in general, is aimed for culture maintenance. This is the only way to keep wooden architecture heritages as part of the building culture in Indonesia.

The law is only one aspect to execute the preservation and conservation program for cultural properties. It could not develop an individual self-consciousness of conservation. The consciousness should come from awareness, and later developed into willingness. Creativity in the context of expertise, as well as collaboration among professionals (architects, carpenters, and government officer), is highly needed to improve the technique and effectiveness of conservation projects.

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